



# Synthesis, characterization, and catalytic evaluation of $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$ as methane combustion catalysts: Significance of Co species and the redox cycle



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 28 July 2014

Received in revised form 9 December 2014

Accepted 11 December 2014

Available online 15 December 2014

### Keywords:

Catalytic combustion of methane

Supported catalyst

Combustion synthesis

Cobalt species

Reducibility

## ABSTRACT

A series of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts with different  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loadings were prepared by incipient wetness impregnation (IWI) and a combination of IWI and subsequent combustion synthesis (CS), and tested for catalytic combustion of  $\text{CH}_4$ . The IWI/CS-X (X=5, 10, 30 and 50, represented the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading as wt%) samples prepared via IWI/CS method exhibited higher catalytic activity than the IWI-X (X=5, 10, 30 and 50) ones via IWI method. IWI/CS-30 showed the highest catalytic activity with  $T_{10}$  (10%  $\text{CH}_4$  conversion) at 300 °C and  $T_{100}$  (complete conversion) at 550 °C. The structure characterization indicated the IWI/CS-X catalysts had a greater surface area with relatively lower  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  crystallization and better  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  dispersion compared with IWI-X samples. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) and UV–vis results revealed that surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}/(\text{Co}^{2+} + \text{Co}^{3+})$  ratios of the IWI/CS-X samples was relatively higher than those of IWI-X ones. The surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  of the IWI/CS-X catalysts was easily reduced to  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  at 280–330 °C, whereas, only one difficult reduction process of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  to  $\text{Co}^0$  was observed at 400–600 °C for all of the IWI-X samples according to hydrogen temperature-programmed reduction ( $\text{H}_2$ -TPR) results. Hence, the abundance of surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$ , easy and fast redox cycle between  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  at low temperatures were the underlying mechanisms for the excellent catalytic performance of IWI/CS-X catalysts in  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion.

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## 1. Introduction

Increasing concern for the world's dependence on petroleum oil has generated great interest in the more efficient use of natural gas [1]. Compared to other fossil fuels, natural gas has the advantages of relatively abundant reserves, lower carbon intensity and higher fuel efficiency. Natural gas-powered vehicles emit 85% less  $\text{NO}_x$ , 70% less reactive hydrocarbons (HCs), and 70% less CO than similar gasoline-powered vehicles [2]. Nowadays, the compressed

natural gas (CNG) engines are widely applied to vehicles. However, the main component of natural gas is  $\text{CH}_4$ , which is a more potent greenhouse gas than  $\text{CO}_2$  with 72 times (over 20 years) the global warming potential (GWP) of  $\text{CO}_2$  [3]. The emission of  $\text{CH}_4$  from vehicles has become an important environmental issue and attracts more and more attentions [4,5]. Therefore, the after-treatment of unconverted  $\text{CH}_4$  in vehicle exhausts has become imperative.

Due to the high stability of the  $\text{CH}_4$  molecule and the low temperature of the exhausts of CNG vehicles (seldom exceeding 500 °C) [6], normal oxidation process is not effective to treat discharged  $\text{CH}_4$ . The catalytic combustion of  $\text{CH}_4$  is believed to be a potential technology to oxidize  $\text{CH}_4$  to  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  at a relatively low temperature according to the literature references [7–12]. Noble metal-based catalysts, especially Pd-based ones, can exhibit outstanding catalytic properties [13,14]. However, the high cost limited their wide application. Considering the relatively abundant resources and lower cost, catalysts based on transition metal

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oxides, such as Co, Cu, Cr, Mn, Fe and In oxides, are increasingly attractive [15,16]. Especially,  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  displays excellent performance in catalytic combustion of  $\text{CH}_4$  [17]. In order to maximize the surface area, and subsequently increase the reactivity, a catalyst is usually distributed over a support material. Xiao et al. [18] reported  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  alone had the high activity for  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion, over which the light-off temperature was only  $500^\circ\text{C}$ .  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  is a competitive candidate for preparation of supported Co catalysts with rich resources and relatively low cost. Unfortunately, the prepared  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalyst showed low activity for  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion due to poor dispersion of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  particles [18].

It is known that the preparation method has an important effect on the dispersion, specific surface area, morphology, and other structural and textural properties of metal-oxide catalysts, which influence their catalytic performances [19]. Incipient wetness impregnation (IWI) is a commonly used technique for the synthesis of heterogeneous catalysts. However, the main disadvantage of IWI is non-uniform deposition. The  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalyst in Xiao et al.'s publication [18] was prepared by this conventional method and the active component,  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ , was not well dispersed on the support surface. During the last few decades, combustion synthesis (CS), a highly exothermic and self-sustaining reaction, has shown to be an efficient, quick, cost-effective and straightforward technique for producing a variety of high-surface area catalysts [20,21]. Recently, Zavyalova et al. has combined IWI and CS as a two-stage process to prepare heterogeneous catalysts, including transition-metal oxides on various supports [19,22]. They found that this method afforded  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts with a high dispersion of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  on the support, more structural defects and greater oxygen nonstoichiometry. However, the detailed comparative information on the structures of supported catalysts with different  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loadings prepared by this new method or the impregnation method is lacked.

The studies on the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts for  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion are generally focused on the catalysts structure. However, the interaction between the Co species and the support is always ignored. The previous works [18,19] considered  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  as an integrated particle and paid much attention on the dispersion of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ . Actually, there exists  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  species in the Co particles and during the catalytic process  $\text{Co}^0$  is also involved. Moreover, the oxidation reduction cycle between  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  is significant for the catalytic combustion of  $\text{CH}_4$  [23]. However, the Co species as well as their redox cycle in the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts for  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion have not been addressed.

In the present study, a series of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts with different  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loadings were prepared by two methods, i.e., IWI alone and a combination of IWI and CS. The structure of the synthesized catalysts was characterized by a variety of methods (e.g., X-ray diffraction, Raman spectra, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy, etc.) and their redox ability was evaluated by hydrogen temperature-programmed reduction. The catalytic capacity of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  for catalytic combustion of  $\text{CH}_4$  was studied within the test temperature range of  $300\text{--}750^\circ\text{C}$ . The specific objectives were to: (1) evaluate the effects of two prepared methods (i.e., IWI and IWI/CS) and  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loadings on the catalysts products, and (2) disclose the roles of Co species and their redox cycle for the catalytic activity of the catalysts in  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Catalyst preparation

For the IWI method, a required amount of aqueous  $\text{Co}(\text{NO}_3)_2\cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  solution was dripped onto  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$ . The mixture was stirred for 8 h, and the water was subsequently evaporated

slowly at  $90^\circ\text{C}$ . The obtained paste was dried overnight at  $110^\circ\text{C}$  and then calcined at  $700^\circ\text{C}$  for 4 h in static air. For the IWI/CS method, Co was introduced through the impregnation of  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  with aqueous solutions of  $\text{Co}(\text{NO}_3)_2\cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and  $(\text{NH}_2)_2\text{CO}$  (molar ratio = 2:1) [24]. The impregnated precipitates were dried at  $110^\circ\text{C}$  and then placed in a crucible. A RCT basic hot plate (IKA WORKS, Wilmington, NC, USA) was used to initiate the exothermic reactions at the temperature of  $230\text{--}250^\circ\text{C}$  for 5 min. After initiation, the self-propagating flameless combustion front in air was observed from the point of ignition and resulted in complete catalyst formation within 1–15 min. Catalysts prepared by IWI and IWI/CS were named as IWI-X and IWI/CS-X, respectively, where X (=5, 10, 30 and 50) represented the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading (wt%).

### 2.2. Catalyst characterization

The BET surface area was analyzed with a Nova Automated Gas Sorption System (Quantachrome Corporation, Boynton Beach, FL, USA) by measuring the  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption isotherms at the liquid  $\text{N}_2$  temperature ( $-196^\circ\text{C}$ ). The pore size distribution was calculated according to the Barrett–Joyner–Halenda (BJH) method. The X-ray diffraction (XRD) measurements were performed on a D/max-2500 X-ray diffractometer (Rigaku Corporation, Tokyo, Japan) using Ni-filtered  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  radiation. The inductively coupled plasma optical emission spectrometry (ICP-OES) measurements were carried out on an IRIS Intrepid II XSP ICP-OES instrument (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). The plasma power was 1150 W. The atomization gas pressure was 26.0 PSI, and the peristaltic pump rotation rate was 100 r/min. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images were taken on a JEM-2011 LaB6 instrument (JEOL, Tokyo, Japan). Raman spectra of the samples were recorded on a RM2000 Raman spectrophotometer (Renishaw plc, Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire, UK). A 514.5 nm  $\text{Ar}^+$  laser source operated at 4.7 mW was used, and samples were scanned over the wavelength range of 150–900 nm. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) data were obtained with an ESCALAB220i-XL electron spectrometer (Thermo VG Scientific, East Grinstead, West Sussex, England) using 300 W  $\text{Mg K}\alpha$  radiation. The base pressure was approximately  $3 \times 10^{-9}$  mbar. The binding energies were referenced to the C 1s line at 284.8 eV from adventitious carbon. UV–vis diffuse reflectance spectra (UV–vis DRS) were recorded in air in the wavelength range 200–800 nm on a UV-2450 UV–vis spectrophotometer (Shimadzu Corporation, Kyoto, Japan). Hydrogen temperature-programmed reduction ( $\text{H}_2$ -TPR) experiments were performed on a Chemisorb 2720 instrument (Micromeritics Instrument Corporation, Norcross, GA, USA). In each experiment, 50 mg of catalyst was used and was pretreated in  $\text{N}_2$  (50 mL/min) at  $300^\circ\text{C}$  for 1 h before the test. TPR started at  $100^\circ\text{C}$ , and the temperature was increased at a rate of  $10^\circ\text{C}/\text{min}$ .

### 2.3. Catalytic activity measurements

The catalytic activities for  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion were tested in a fixed-bed quartz reactor (i.d. 8 mm) with 250 mg of catalyst (40–60 mesh). The operating conditions were as follows: 0.2 vol%  $\text{CH}_4$ , 10 vol%  $\text{O}_2$ , and  $\text{N}_2$  as the balance gas, with a total flow rate of 150 mL/min, which corresponds to a GHSV of approximately 36 000 mL/h g. The concentrations of  $\text{CH}_4$  in the inlet and outlet gases were measured using an on-line 7890A gas chromatograph (Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA, USA) within the test temperature range of  $300\text{--}750^\circ\text{C}$ . In order to test the stability of catalysts, the catalytic reaction was continuously carried out at  $800^\circ\text{C}$  for 10 days using IWI/CS-30. The  $\text{CH}_4$  conversion gradually decreased (Fig. S1), indicating  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts were not stable at high temperature.

## 2.4. Principal components analysis

Principal components analysis (PCA) was carried out to study the relations between catalytic activity and physicochemical properties using SPSS13.0 for Windows (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test were introduced to evaluate the validity of PCA, and a >0.5 of KMO and significant Bartlett's test were requisite before the PCA.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Structural properties of catalysts

ICP-OES experiments were performed to detect the actual  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loadings of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts and the results are listed in Table 1. For IWI-5, IWI-50 and IWI/CS-10, the actual  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loadings were slightly higher than the initial  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  dose, while the final  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loadings of IWI-10, IWI-30, IWI/CS-5, IWI/CS-30 and IWI/CS-50 were lower than the initial  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  addition.

The BET surface area, pore volume, and average pore diameter of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts are summarized in Table 1 and pore size distribution is shown Fig. 1. Because the BET surface area of  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  ( $169\text{ m}^2/\text{g}$ ) was significantly greater than that of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ ,  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  is considered to be the main contributor to the BET surface area of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts [25]. If  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  is assumed to be the only contributor to the BET surface area and pore volume of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts, the BET surface areas and pore volumes can be calculated as the following equation:

$$V_{\text{cal.}} = V_{\text{det.}} \times (1 - \% \text{Co}_3\text{O}_4) \quad (1)$$

where  $V_{\text{cal.}}$  and  $V_{\text{det.}}$  are the calculated and determined values, respectively, and  $\% \text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  is the actual  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading. As shown in Table 1, the measured BET surface area values were slightly lower than the calculated values, except for that of IWI/CS-30, as were the pore volumes, except for those of IWI-5 and IWI-10. These results indicated some pore blockage of  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  by  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  clusters. However, the measured pore volumes of IWI-5 and IWI-10 were somewhat higher than the calculated values, which may be related to a change in the pore size distribution and to a decrease in the number of small pores. With respect to the pore size distribution, the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading resulted in a fraction of small pores being blocked and an increase in pore diameters from 11.6 to 13.3 nm for IWI-5, IWI-10, IWI-30, IWI-50 and IWI/CS-50 (Table 1, Fig. 1). In addition, the measured pore diameters of IWI/CS-5 and IWI/CS-10 were almost the same as that of  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$ , because the pore size distribution of these samples did not change significantly. Concerning the IWI/CS-30 catalyst, both the relatively high BET surface area ( $131\text{ m}^2/\text{g}$ ) and the small pore diameter (8.9 nm) revealed that  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  were well dispersed on the surface of the  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$ ; this level

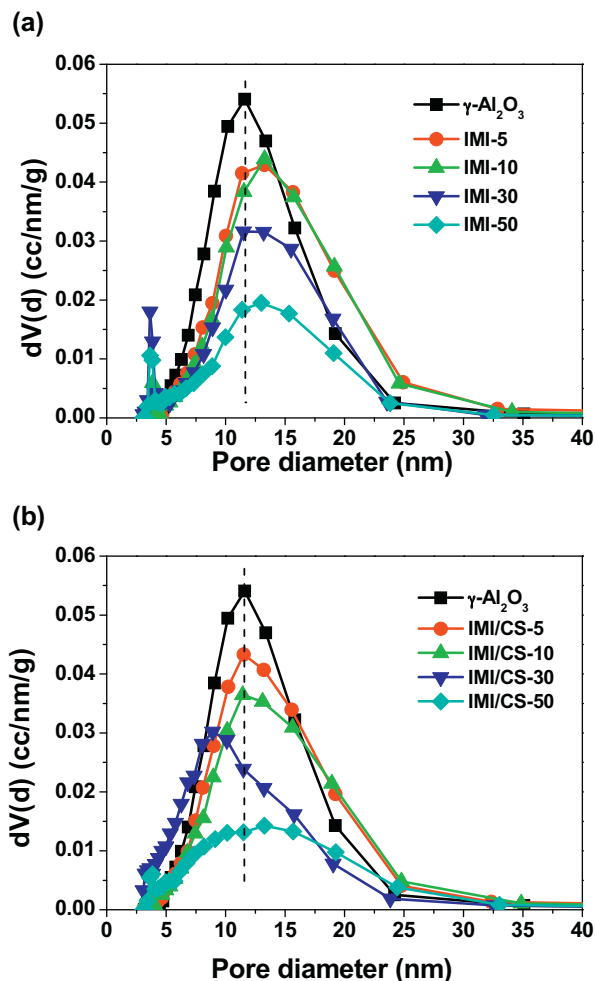


Fig. 1. Pore size distribution of  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts: (a) IWI-X catalysts, and (b) IWI/CS-X catalysts.

of dispersion was believed to be responsible for its outstanding catalytic performance in  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion as described below.

The XRD profiles of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts are presented in Fig. 2. For all of the catalysts, the only pure Co phase identified was the spinel-structured  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  (JPCDS: 76-1802). The other observed diffraction peaks were attributed to  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$ . In the case of the IWI-X ( $X = 5, 10, 30$  and  $50$ ) catalysts, increased  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loadings increased the intensity of the diffraction peaks of the spinel-structured  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ . IWI-50, in particular, showed diffraction peaks for only  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  with no diffraction peaks that corresponded to the support. The diffraction peaks of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  in IWI/CS-X ( $X = 5, 10, 30$  and  $50$ ) were broader and weaker than those of the IWI-X catalysts, which indicates the

Table 1  
Actual  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading, BET surface area, pore volume, pore diameter and  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  crystallite size of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts.

Catalysts	Actual $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ loading (%) <sup>a</sup>	BET surface area ( $\text{m}^2/\text{g}$ )	Pore volume ( $\text{cc/g}^{-1}$ )	Pore diameter (nm)	$\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ crystallite size (nm) <sup>c</sup>
$\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$	–	169	0.53	11.6	–
IWI-5	5.1	149 (160 <sup>b</sup> )	0.53 (0.50)	13.3	14.9
IWI-10	9.4	143 (153)	0.51 (0.48)	13.3	17.1
IWI-30	28.4	116 (121)	0.37 (0.38)	13.3	20.9
IWI-50	50.2	77 (84)	0.25 (0.26)	13.3	30
IWI/CS-5	4.9	151 (161)	0.51 (0.51)	11.5	6.8
IWI/CS-10	10.4	135 (151)	0.46 (0.47)	11.4	9.4
IWI/CS-30	29.2	131 (120)	0.34 (0.38)	8.9	6.5
IWI/CS-50	46.8	73 (90)	0.24 (0.28)	13.3	10.7

<sup>a</sup> Calculated by Co content determined by ICP-OES.

<sup>b</sup> Calculated BET surface area or pore volume.

<sup>c</sup> Estimated by the Scherrer equation using the full-width at half-maximum of the characteristic diffraction peaks (indicated in Fig. 2).

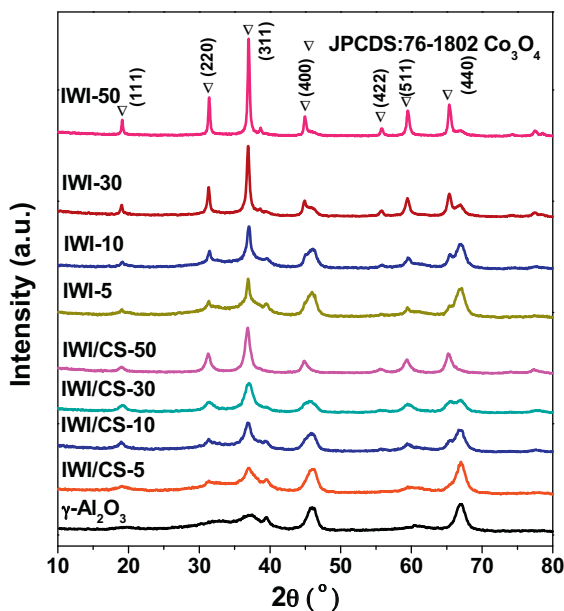


Fig. 2. XRD profiles of  $\gamma$ - $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma$ - $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts.

lower degree of crystallization of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  and the higher degree of dispersion of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  in IWI/CS-X [19]. According to Scherrer equation, the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  crystalline size can be determined from each characteristic diffraction peak and the average values are summarized in Table 1. In general, the average  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  crystallite size for all of the catalysts increased with increasing Co content because of the enhanced sintering and agglomeration of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  [26]. Specifically, the crystallite size of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  in the IWI-X samples increased from 14.9 to 30.0 nm as the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading increased from 5% to 50%. The crystallite sizes of IWI/CS-X catalysts were relatively smaller. The average crystallite size of IWI/CS-30 was the smallest (6.5 nm), which indicated the well-dispersion of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ . When the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading was greater than 30%, the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  crystallite sizes of both IWI-X and IWI/CS-X catalysts rapidly increased, implying that the agglomeration of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  had occurred. The TEM pictures also showed IWI/CS-X catalysts had relatively smaller  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  particles than IWI-X catalysts (Fig. S2).

Raman spectra of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma$ - $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts are shown in Fig. 3. Alumina itself is not Raman active, so all of the observed signals were caused by  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  [18]. As shown in Fig. 3, the four peaks at 483, 523, 621, and 694  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , which correspond to the  $E_g$ ,  $F_{1g}^1$ ,  $F_{2g}^1$ , and  $A_{1g}^1$  modes of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  spinel structure, respectively, are observed for all of the samples, indicating that the surface layer of catalysts is covered by  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  [27]. Systematic investigations of the effect of cations and isomorphous isotopic substitutions in spinels have shown that the 694  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  vibration is the characteristic of the sublattice (octahedral/tetrahedral) in which the highest-valence cations are mainly located [28]. Any slight differences in this vibration can be associated with lattice distortion or residual stress of the spinel structure [29]. With increasing Co content, the  $A_g^1$  vibration shifted slightly toward lower wavenumbers for both the IWI-X and IWI/CS-X samples. In addition, a slight increase in the full-width at half-maximum of the peak was also identified. All of these data indicated that with increasing Co content, the supported Co spinel catalysts exhibited a more defective structure. This effect could result in a higher concentration of Co in the low oxidation state and in a greater concentration of oxygen defects [30]. For the IWI/CS-X samples, the intensity of the Raman peaks did not significantly change with increased Co loading. Furthermore, the weaker and broader peaks for  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  were detected in IWI/CS-X samples compared with those of IWI-X catalysts revealed that Co species were

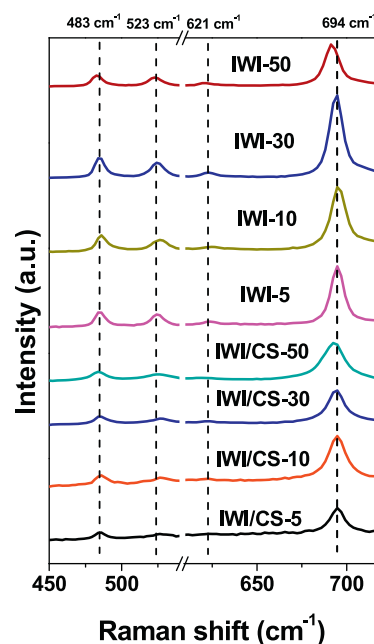


Fig. 3. Raman spectra of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma$ - $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts.

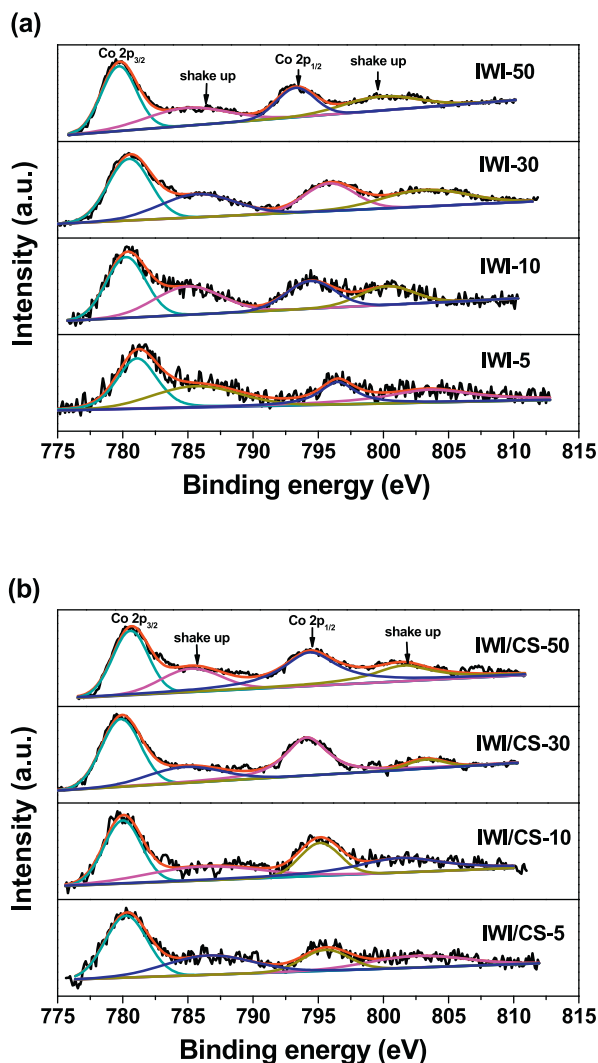
well dispersed on the surface of the  $\gamma$ - $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  support, which was in agreement with the pore size distribution and XRD results [31].

The results of the BET surface area, pore size distribution, XRD and Raman spectra indicated that the IWI/CS method provided  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma$ - $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts with a smaller average crystalline size, a lower degree of crystallization of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  and a higher degree of dispersion of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  than did the IWI method. Because the combustion process is completed in a very short time during the syntheses and large quantities of vapors (e.g.,  $\text{CO}_2$ ,  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , and  $\text{NO}_2$ ) are rapidly released, the growth of spinel crystals is limited. As a consequence, nano-sized grains with a smaller crystallite size and a greater surface area (compared with those of samples prepared via the IWI method) were obtained [19].

### 3.2. Cobalt species and the redox ability of catalysts

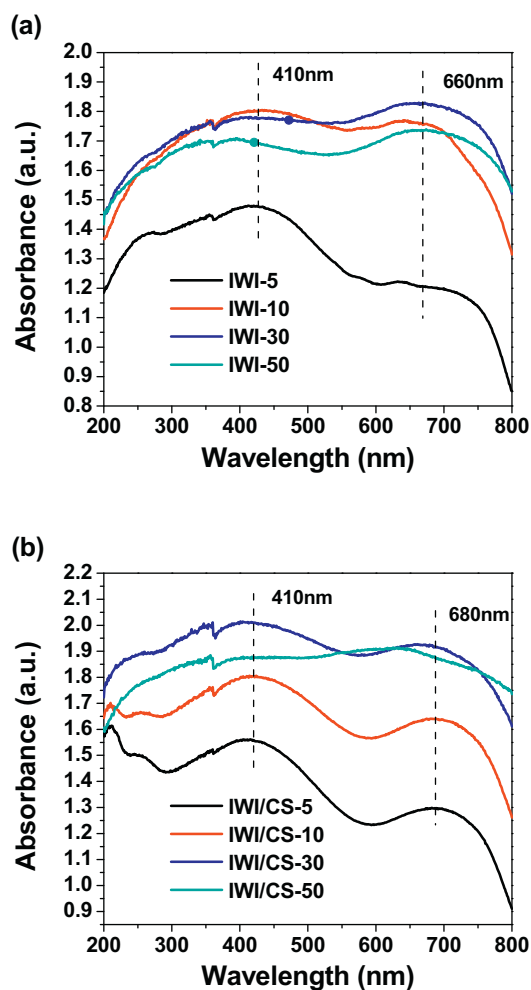
The Co 2p spectra of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma$ - $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  samples are shown in Fig. 4. The binding energy (BE) values are consistent with the presence of both  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Co}^{3+}$ . The relevant band positions of these species differ by 0.9 eV, with the  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  2p band occurring at a higher BE because of covalency and final-state effects [32]. Nevertheless, a spectral feature that could differentiate between  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  was a satellite for  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  peaks, because photoemitted electrons interact with core vacancy and valence electrons of  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  but not with those of  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  [33]. In the spectra of all of the samples, both the Co 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Co 2p<sub>1/2</sub> peaks contained a satellite peak at BEs approximately 6 eV higher, which indicated the presence of  $\text{Co}^{2+}$ .

As shown in Table 2, the ratio of the intensity of the Co 2p<sub>3/2</sub> satellite to that of the relevant main peak,  $I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}$ , was used to indicate the surface  $\text{Co}^{2+}/(\text{Co}^{2+} + \text{Co}^{3+})$  ratio. For the IWI/CS-X (X = 5, 10 and 30) samples,  $I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}$  decreased from 0.6 to 0.4 as the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading was increased from 5 to 30 wt%, indicating an increase of  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  percentage in the catalyst surface. As the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading was increased, the spin–orbit separation between Co 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Co 2p<sub>1/2</sub>,  $\Delta_{1/2-3/2}$ , decreased from 15.4 to 15.1 eV (Table 2), which confirmed a parallel increase in the amount of surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$ . However, the  $I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}$  (0.7) of the IWI/CS-50 catalyst was greater than that of IWI/CS-5, which illustrated that excessive  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading decreased the surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}/(\text{Co}^{2+} + \text{Co}^{3+})$  ratio.



**Fig. 4.** Co 2p spectra of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts: (a) IWI-X catalysts, and (b) IWI/CS-X catalysts.

The  $I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}$  of the IWI-X ( $X = 10, 30$  and  $50$ ) samples decreased from  $0.9$  (IWI-10), which was close to the value for  $\text{CoO}$ , to  $0.8$  (IWI-50) with increasing the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading from  $10$  to  $50$  wt%; this decrease indicated a slight increase in the amount of surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  [33]. Similarly, as the Co content was increased,  $\Delta_{1/2-3/2}$  decreased from  $16.3$  (IWI-10) to  $15.3$  eV (IWI-50), and the BE of  $\text{Co } 2p_{3/2}$  shifted from  $781.8$  to  $780.3$  eV. These changes demonstrated an increase in surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$ . However, the  $I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}$  of the IWI-5 sam-



**Fig. 5.** UV-vis spectra of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts: (a) IWI-X catalysts, and (b) IWI/CS-X catalysts.

ple ( $0.7$ ) was close to that of IWI/CS-5 ( $0.6$ ), indicating a similar surface structure with a low  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading between IWI-X and IWI/CS-X catalysts. It was clear that the IWI/CS-X samples tended to contain greater surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}/(\text{Co}^{2+} + \text{Co}^{3+})$  ratios than did the IWI-X catalysts.

The UV-vis spectra of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  are shown in Fig. 5. For the IWI/CS-X samples ( $X = 5, 10$  and  $30$ ), the intensities of the  $410$  nm absorption band, which was assigned to the octahedral  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  ( $^1A_{1g} \rightarrow ^1T_{2g}$ ) transition, and the  $680$  nm absorption band, which was assigned to the octahedral  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  ( $^1A_{1g} \rightarrow ^1T_{1g}$ ), increased pro-

**Table 2**  
XPS parameters of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts.

Sample	Co $2p_{3/2}$ main BE (eV)	Co $2p_{1/2}$ satellite BE (eV)	$I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}^a$	$\Delta_{1/2-3/2}^b$ (eV)
IWI-5	781.1	785.8	0.7	15.7
IWI-10	780.8	785.8	0.9	16.3
IWI-30	780.4	784.8	0.8	15.8
IWI-50	780.3	785.7	0.8	15.3
IWI/CS-5	780.3	786.5	0.6	15.4
IWI/CS-10	780.0	785.6	0.5	15.2
IWI/CS-30	780.2	785.4	0.4	15.1
IWI/CS-50	780.8	786.4	0.7	15.8
CoO [33]	–	–	0.9	15.9
$\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ [33]	–	–	$1^c$	15.0

<sup>a</sup> The  $I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}$  was determined to  $\pm 0.1$ .

<sup>b</sup> Spin-orbit separation between the two main  $\text{Co } 2p_{3/2}$  and  $\text{Co } 2p_{1/2}$  peaks.

<sup>c</sup> Broad and low-intensity  $\text{Co } 2p_{3/2}$ ; the  $I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}$  was not assessed in Ref. [33].

portionally with the Co content, which confirmed the presence of surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  on the catalysts [26]. The IWI/CS-50 sample exhibited two small absorption bands at 410 and 638 nm. The strong absorption at 638 nm may have been the combination of the 670 nm peak of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  and the 625 nm peak of tetrahedral  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  [34]. It has been suggested that surface  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  species were stabilized by strong interactions with the alumina and that this stabilization led to a decreased  $\text{Co}^{3+}/(\text{Co}^{2+} + \text{Co}^{3+})$  ratio and was responsible for the negative impact on the catalytic activity [35]. For the IWI/CS-5 and IWI/CS-10 catalysts, the absorptions at 255 nm, which were observed when the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading was low, were due to the residual  $\text{NO}_3^- n \rightarrow \pi^*$  charge-transfer band [36].

The spectrum of the IWI-5 sample was similar to that of IWI/CS-5, with two absorption peaks at 410 and 680 nm; the occurrence of these peaks indicated the presence of octahedral  $\text{Co}^{3+}$ . However, the poor catalytic performance of the IWI-5 sample was due to the difficult reduction of the surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$ . The IWI-10, IWI-30 and IWI-50 samples all exhibited two peaks with almost the same intensity: one at 380–420 nm attributed to octahedral  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  and the other at 660 nm due to the combination of the 680 nm peak of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  and the 625 nm peak of tetrahedral  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  [37]. The intense absorption peaks at approximately 660 nm indicated the presence of abundant surface  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  for IWI-10, IWI-30 and IWI-50, which led to the decrease of  $\text{Co}^{3+}/(\text{Co}^{2+} + \text{Co}^{3+})$  ratio.

To investigate the reducibility of the Co species in the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts,  $\text{H}_2$ -TPR was performed. As is evident from the results in Fig. 6, the  $\text{H}_2$ -TPR profiles of the IWI-5 and IWI-10 catalysts exhibited only one reduction peak centered at 500 °C, whereas the profiles of both IWI-30 and IWI-50 exhibited three reduction peaks between 300 and 600 °C. The relative  $\text{H}_2$  consumption increased with the increases of Co loadings (Table S1). To obtain detailed information about the reduction process, IWI-10 was characterized by XRD after reduction at 500 °C for 30 min under a 10%  $\text{H}_2/\text{He}$  atmosphere. Similarly, IWI-30 was analyzed by XRD after being reduced at 375, 480 and 550 °C, respectively. According to the results shown in Figs. 7 and 8, the reduction peaks at 512 and 500 °C for IWI-5 and IWI-10, respectively, could be assigned to the reduction of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  to  $\text{Co}^0$ . For the reduction peaks of IWI-30 and IWI-50, the first (weak) peak was attributed to the reduction process of some surface-adsorbed oxygen, whereas the second and third peaks were attributed to the direct reduction of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  to  $\text{Co}^0$ . Generally,  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  will be reduced to  $\text{CoO}$  firstly. However, no apparent related reduction peaks were detected by XRD, indicating the reduction from  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  to  $\text{CoO}$  in IWI-X samples was difficult.

The  $\text{H}_2$ -TPR profiles indicated 2 reduction peaks detected in IWI/CS-X samples (Fig. 6b). The relative  $\text{H}_2$  consumption increased with increasing the Co loadings from 5% to 30%, and showed a decline trend when continuously increasing the Co loading to 50% (Table S1). With respect to the reduction of IWI/CS-30, Fig. 9 shows that after the catalyst was reduced at 300 °C and 670 °C for 30 min under a 10%  $\text{H}_2/\text{He}$  atmosphere, only the diffraction peaks for  $\text{CoO}$ ,  $\text{Co}^0$  and  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  were observed. Therefore, for all of the IWI/CS-X samples, the first reduction peak between 280 and 330 °C was assigned to the reduction of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  to  $\text{CoO}$ , and the second broad reduction peak from 510 to 690 °C was attributed to the reduction of  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  to  $\text{Co}^0$ . The reduction peaks at low temperatures (280–330 °C) for the IWI/CS-X samples, due to the reduction of  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  to  $\text{Co}^{2+}$ , are thought to be highly relevant to the catalytic activity toward  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion. The catalytic activity of IWI/CS-50 was between those of the IWI/CS-10 and IWI/CS-30 samples (as discussed below). Although the IWI/CS-50 catalyst contained a high  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading, the BET surface area was  $73 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$  and the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  crystallites were as large as 10.7 nm. In addition, the reduction of larger particles of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  on IWI/CS-50 was more difficult than the reduction of smaller particles, as evidenced by the  $\text{H}_2$ -TPR data (Fig. 6). This behavior was not consistent with the conclusions drawn by Solsona

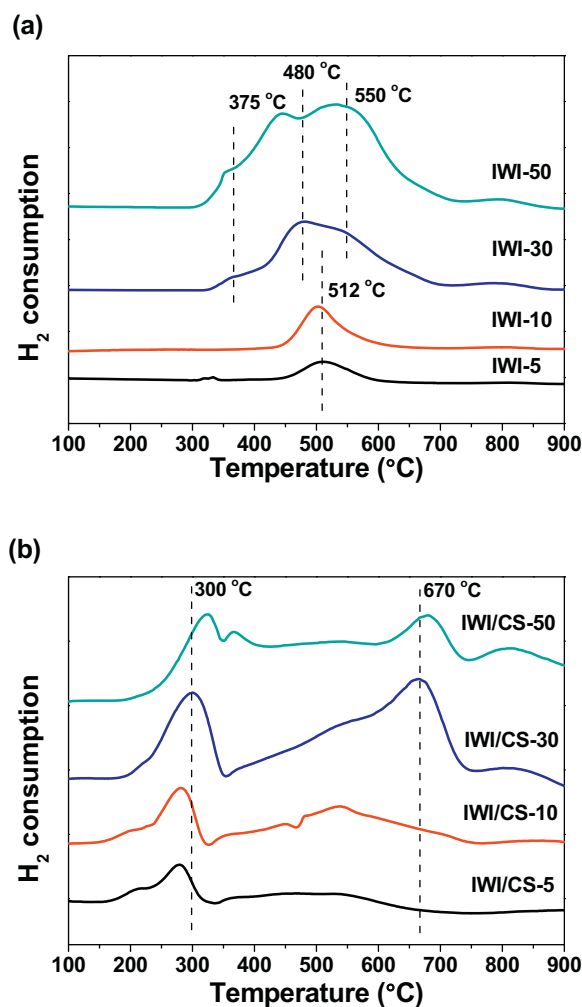


Fig. 6.  $\text{H}_2$ -TPR profile of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts: (a) IWI-X catalysts, and (b) IWI/CS-X catalysts.

et al. [37]. Therefore, we inferred that the reduction of Co species is complex and is affected by numerous factors, including the content, the particle size and interactions between the support and the Co species. The effects of the particle size and the support interaction can be superimposed on each other. Whereas a decrease in the particle size of the metal oxide can result in a faster reduction rate due to a greater surface area/volume ratio, smaller particles may interact more with the support and slow the reduction [35].

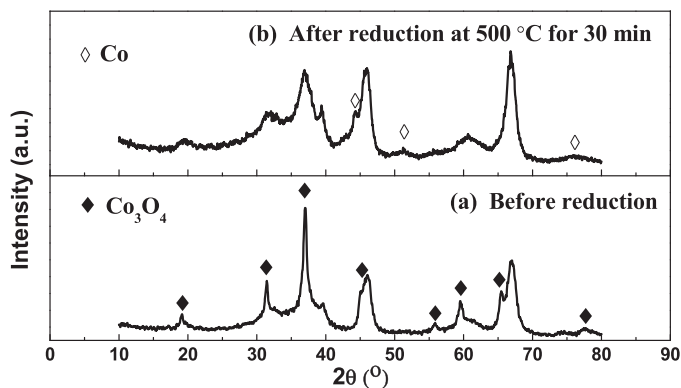
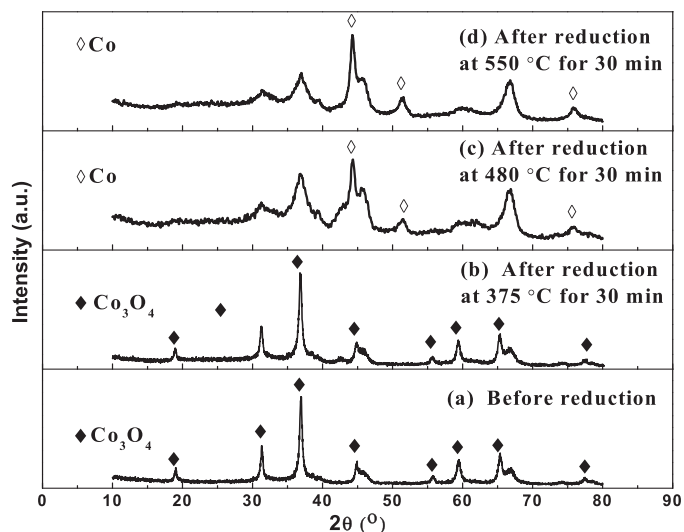
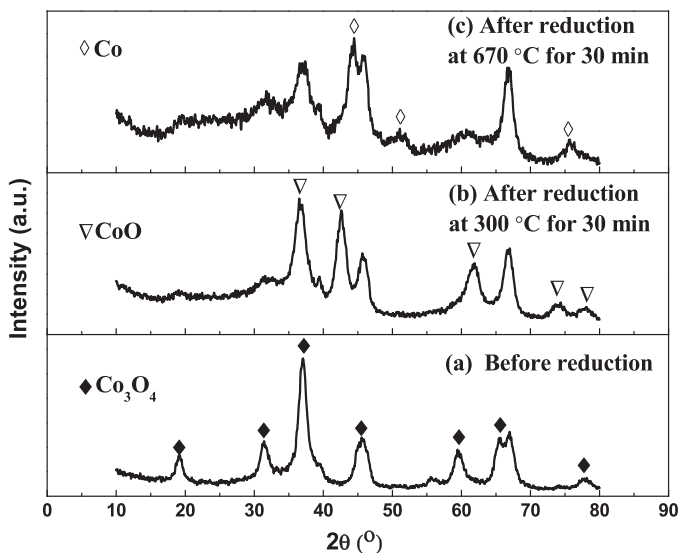


Fig. 7. XRD patterns of IWI-10 before and after reduction: (a) before reduction and (b) after reduction at 500 °C for 30 min under a 10%  $\text{H}_2/\text{He}$  atmosphere.

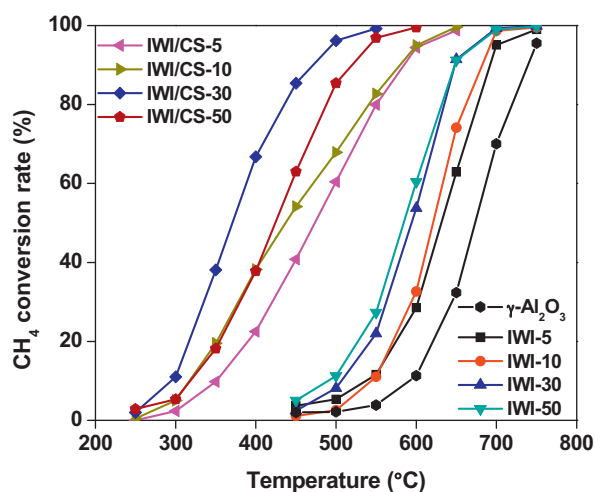


**Fig. 8.** XRD patterns of IWI-30 before and after reduction: (a) before reduction, (b) after reduction at 375 °C for 30 min under a 10%  $\text{H}_2$ /He atmosphere, (c) after reduction at 480 °C for 30 min under a 10%  $\text{H}_2$ /He atmosphere, and (d) after reduction at 550 °C for 30 min under a 10%  $\text{H}_2$ /He atmosphere.

The concentration of surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  on the IWI/CS-X samples was relatively high, and this surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  could be easily reduced to  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  at temperatures between 280 and 330 °C. Bahlawaue has demonstrated that the combustion of  $\text{CH}_4$  follows a Mars–Van Krevelen mechanism, which involves two irreversible steps [23]. The  $\text{CH}_4$  firstly reacts with the lattice oxygen resulting in its reduction and the formation of oxygen vacant site on the Co catalyst. The second step, which is rate-limiting, consists of the re-oxidation of the reduced catalyst site by the oxygen of the gas phase. The Mars–Van Krevelen mechanism indicates the importance of an effective electron sink, i.e., in terms of the reduction of  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  to  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  in the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  spinel structure, for harboring the excess electrons upon  $\text{CO}_2$  formation, until being reoxidised by  $\text{O}_2$  [38]. Ngamou and Bahlawaue have reported that the higher reducibility of the edge-connected octahedrally coordinated  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  was responsible for the superior activity of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  toward the deep oxidation of aromatic compounds [39]. Moreover, Shen has stated that the CO molecule interacts



**Fig. 9.** XRD patterns of IWI/CS-30 before and after reduction: (a) before reduction, (b) after reduction at 300 °C for 30 min under a 10%  $\text{H}_2$ /He atmosphere, and (c) after reduction at 670 °C for 30 min under a 10%  $\text{H}_2$ /He atmosphere.



**Fig. 10.** Methane conversion over  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts. Reaction conditions: 0.2 vol.%  $\text{CH}_4$ , 10 vol.%  $\text{O}_2$ , and  $\text{N}_2$  as the balance gas, with a total flow rate of 150 mL/min.

preferably with surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  cations, which is the only favorable site for CO adsorption, as confirmed both theoretically and experimentally [40]. These results strongly suggest that the existence of abundant and easily reduced surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  has a crucial effect on the catalytic combustion of  $\text{CH}_4$ . In addition, density functional theory (DFT) calculations of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  (110) model illustrated that the bonding of O-3c with one  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  and two  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  cations was slightly more favorable than the bonding of O-2c with one  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  and one  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  cations, which provided further evidence for the key role of  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  in the catalytic combustion of  $\text{CH}_4$ .

The  $\text{H}_2$ -TPR, XPS and UV–vis results strongly indicated that the IWI/CS was a better method to prepare  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalysts, which created well-dispersed  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  on the  $\gamma\text{-Al}_2\text{O}_3$  support. The produced catalysts had high surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}/(\text{Co}^{2+} + \text{Co}^{3+})$  ratios, and the surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  ions bound more favorably with O-3c. What is more, the prepared catalysts contained a greater amount of easily reduced Co species. Conversely, the catalysts prepared by the IWI method were poorly dispersed, contained Co species that were difficult to reduce from  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  to  $\text{Co}^{2+}$ , and exhibited low surface  $\text{Co}^{3+}/(\text{Co}^{2+} + \text{Co}^{3+})$  ratios.

### 3.3. Catalytic combustion of methane

Fig. 10 shows the  $\text{CH}_4$  conversion achieved at different temperatures on the catalysts with different  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loadings. The reaction products consisted entirely of  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  in the temperature range investigated. For the IWI-X (X = 5, 10, 30 and 50) catalysts, the catalytic activity of  $\text{CH}_4$  combustion increased with increasing  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading, and IWI-50 exhibited the highest activity. The catalytic performances of IWI-30 and IWI-50 were nearly identical; these catalysts achieved 10%  $\text{CH}_4$  conversion at approximately 500 °C and complete conversion at 700 °C. These results illustrate that the catalytic activity was exclusively due to the presence of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ .

All of the catalysts prepared via the IWI/CS method showed better catalytic activity than the catalysts prepared via the IWI method. At the same reaction temperature, the reaction rate and turnover frequency (TOF) of IWI/CS-X catalysts were higher by more than one order of magnitude than IWI-X ones (Table S2, S3). When the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  loading was less than 30 wt%, the catalytic activity of IWI/CS-X catalysts quickly increased with increasing Co content. The IWI/CS-30 catalyst showed the highest activity, over which the  $T_{10}$  (10%  $\text{CH}_4$  conversion) was 300 °C and the  $T_{100}$  (complete conversion)

occurred at 550 °C. The IWI/CS-50 catalyst showed an intermediate catalytic activity between those of the IWI/CS-10 and IWI/CS-30 samples.

The large discrepancy in the dispersion, degree of crystallization and reducibility of Co species between catalysts prepared via the IWI and IWI/CS methods resulted in different catalytic performance of CH<sub>4</sub> combustion.

For samples synthesized via the IWI method, the reduction of Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> to Co<sup>0</sup> was the only reduction process of the cobalt species and this process was quite difficult (occurring at approximately 500 °C). Moreover, the re-oxidation of Co<sup>0</sup> to Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> would also be difficult. Consequently, the difficult oxidation and reduction cycle between Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> and Co<sup>0</sup> led to the lower activity of IWI-X catalysts toward CH<sub>4</sub> combustion. For the IWI/CS-X samples, the preparation process resulted in good dispersion of the Co species and the formation of abundant Co<sup>3+</sup> on the surfaces of samples, which is easily reduced to Co<sup>2+</sup> at approximately 300 °C. Hence, the easy and fast oxidation and reduction cycle between Co<sup>2+</sup> and Co<sup>3+</sup> at low temperatures was the main cause of the excellent catalytic performance of these catalysts in CH<sub>4</sub> combustion. In particular, for IWI/CS-30, the smallest average particle size (6.5 nm), the relatively higher BET surface area (131 m<sup>2</sup>/g) and the highest surface Co<sup>3+</sup>/(Co<sup>2+</sup> + Co<sup>3+</sup>) ratio played important roles in the outstanding catalytic properties of this catalyst. As a result, IWI/CS-30 exhibited the best catalytic methane combustion performance among the investigated samples. However, for IWI/CS-50, the excessive Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> loading resulted in a diminished catalytic performance.

### 3.4. Relations between catalytic activity and physicochemical properties

The above results indicated the different catalytic activities of catalysts were resulted from the discrepancies of physicochemical properties including structural characteristics and Co species statuses. To comprehensively investigate the relations between catalytic activity and physicochemical properties, PCA was employed in the present study, which was proved an effective multivariate technique to interpret complex variations data [41–43].

For the convenient comparison of the catalytic activity, half CH<sub>4</sub> conversion temperature (CT50) values were calculated by sigmoidal fitting the CH<sub>4</sub> conversion curve (Fig. 10). For the IWI-X (X=5, 10, 30 and 50) catalysts, the CT50 were 631, 620, 593 and 584 °C, respectively, and for IWI/CS-X (X=5, 10, 30 and 50) samples, the CT50 were 472, 440, 371 and 423 °C, respectively. The CT50 of IWI/CS-30 is comparable with the previously reported data for the CH<sub>4</sub> combustion over Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/γ-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (320–396 °C) [19]. The

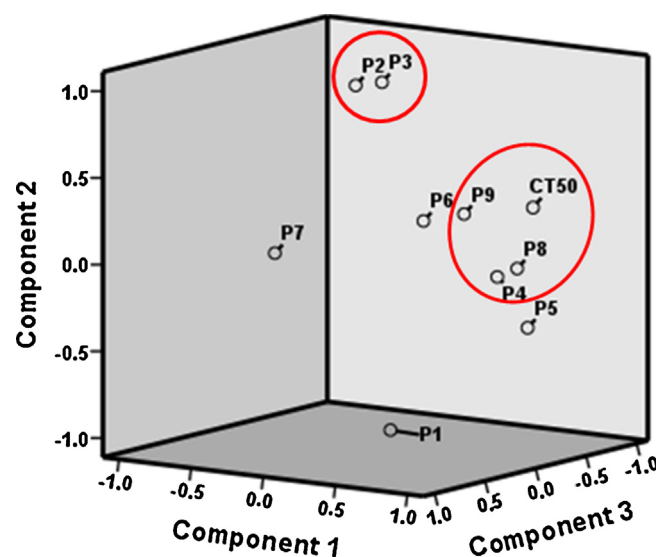


Fig. 11. Plot of loading of three principal components in PCA results. Symbols: CT50, half CH<sub>4</sub> conversion temperature; P1, Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> loading; P2, BET surface area; P3, pore volume; P4, pore diameter; P5, Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> crystallite size; P6, Co 2p<sub>3/2</sub> main BE; P7, Co 2p<sub>1/2</sub> satellite BE; P8,  $I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}$ ; P9,  $\Delta_{1/2-3/2}$ .

studied physicochemical properties included Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> loading (P1), BET surface area (P2), pore volume (P3), pore diameter (P4), Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> crystallite size (P5), Co 2p<sub>3/2</sub> main BE (P6), Co 2p<sub>1/2</sub> satellite BE (P7),  $I_{\text{sat}}/I_{\text{main}}$  (P8) and  $\Delta_{1/2-3/2}$  (P9) (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 3 shows the results of the factor loadings with a varimax rotation as well as the eigenvalues. Three eigenvalues are higher than one and the three components explain 90% of the total variance. The relations among catalytic activity and physicochemical properties based on the three principal components are illustrated in three-dimensional (3D) space (Fig. 11). P4, P8 and P9 are close to CT50, indicating a similar change pattern. The high correlations imply the pore diameter and Co<sup>3+</sup> content are the strongest factors that affect the catalytic activity. Smaller pore diameter and higher Co<sup>3+</sup> content result in higher catalytic activity. The close relation between P2 and P3 suggests that BET surface area is mostly influenced by pore volume.

## 4. Conclusions

A combination of incipient wetness impregnation (IWI) and subsequent combustion synthesis (CS) proved to be an effective method to prepare Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/γ-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> catalysts. The catalysts synthesized via the IWI/CS method contained well-dispersed Co species and abundant Co<sup>3+</sup>, which played a crucial role in the catalytic combustion of CH<sub>4</sub>. Particularly, IWI/CS-30 showed the best catalytic performance, and the total conversion of CH<sub>4</sub> occurred at 550 °C. However, the concentration of surface Co<sup>3+</sup> on the IWI-X catalysts were relatively low, and the Co<sup>3+</sup> was difficult to reduce to Co<sup>2+</sup>, which led to lower activity of these catalysts toward the combustion of CH<sub>4</sub>.

## Acknowledgments

This study is financially supported by the S0926-3373(14) 00790-5Program for International S&T Cooperation Program of China (011DFG33480) and S0926-3373(14) 00790-5National Basic Research Program of China (2008CB418004).

Table 3

Rotated component matrix for catalytic activity and physicochemical properties of Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/γ-Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> catalysts.

Properties	Component		
	1	2	3
CT50	<b>0.859<sup>a</sup></b>	0.320	−0.333
P1	0.176	<b>−0.970</b>	0.102
P2	−0.293	<b>0.924</b>	−0.223
P3	−0.040	<b>0.982</b>	−0.121
P4	<b>0.936</b>	−0.005	0.130
P5	<b>0.754</b>	−0.399	<b>−0.430</b>
P6	<b>0.657</b>	0.337	<b>0.463</b>
P7	−0.080	0.137	<b>0.881</b>
P8	<b>0.972</b>	0.025	−0.015
P9	<b>0.778</b>	0.356	0.233
Eigenvalue	4.288	3.277	1.433
% Of variance explained	42.878	32.772	14.327
% Of cumulative	42.878	75.650	89.978

<sup>a</sup> |PCA loadings| > 0.4 are shown in bold.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2014.12.016>.

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